

CELEBRATING OUR LONG- STANDING PARTNERSHIP WITH YALARI

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In 2005, Waverley Stanley approached Herbert Smith Freehills ('Freehills' at the time) Melbourne partner John Emerson for legal advice. He was passionate about effecting lasting change in the lives of Indigenous children through education, and wanted to establish a foundation. With the firm's pro bono support, Yalari began operating as a not-for-profit organisation with deductible gift recipient status—the necessary legal framework for it to accept charitable donations. In that first year, Yalari offered secondary education scholarships to three children.

Neither Yalari nor Herbert Smith Freehills could have imagined the enduring and multifaceted partnership that has grown since then. More than 13 years later, Yalari currently supports 187 Indigenous children with high school scholarships at 28 leading boarding schools around Australia, with an alumni group of 313.

Yalari's mission is to educate and empower Indigenous children from regional, rural and remote communities around Australia to bring about generational change. Yalari aims to provide trusted, quality educational opportunities for Indigenous children to achieve positive outcomes for themselves and their families and make valuable contributions as Australians, whatever their skills.

BEGINNINGS

Like most enduring partnerships between organisations, the relationship between Yalari and Herbert Smith Freehills developed through personal introductions. A Yalari board member introduced Waverley to former Freehills partner John Taberner, who in turn introduced him to Annette Bain, the then head of the Freehills Foundation.

Brisbane lawyers and staff took the lead by volunteering at Yalari's annual fundraising dinner, which soon spread to similar events in Melbourne and Sydney. Herbert Smith Freehills staff have now been volunteering at these events for six or seven years.

Their belief in Yalari's mission led to an invitation to address the national partners' conference in 2011, a strategic decision that proved to be a turning point for both organisations.

“To get in front of partners, explain our story, and convey that we wanted a deeper relationship with corporates - that was a defining moment for us,” Waverley explained.

At the conference, Waverley painted Yalari's big picture vision of the impact over a generation that their scholarship model was designed to achieve. His speech came at a time when the firm was exploring strategic ways to increase education, employment and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Afterwards, the firm began to host corporate lunches for Yalari in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane with the purpose of introducing Yalari to Herbert Smith Freehills clients that wanted to engage with Indigenous organisations. Those introductions proved invaluable to Yalari developing other long-term corporate partnerships.

'Herbert Smith Freehills always asked us, "What else can we do?" And we were always honest with them about what we needed - and what we didn't.' ~ Llew Mullins, Managing Director, Yalari



STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT: PATHWAYS

In 2011, as part of a strategic review of Herbert Smith Freehills' pro bono practice and community program, the idea for a series of workshops emerged. The idea was to give Yalari scholarship holders in their final year of high school the opportunity to meet Herbert Smith Freehills staff and have real-life experiences that would help them transition to employment and the world beyond school.

Designed in partnership, Pathways workshops run over two consecutive days at a Herbert Smith Freehills office. Each lawyer works one-on-one with each respective student, using structured discussion to learn about different types of jobs, and role play while conducting mock job interviews.

“The children love the workshops,” says Llew. “It's the first time they feel like an adult.”

“I benefited from most things from the workshop, everything really helped me. Now I have fresh ideas on what I would like to do after school. I liked the guest speakers and the types of activities played with the whole group. I benefited from learning how to write resumes, especially doing mock interviews to work on skills needed for after school that we don't necessarily learn at school.” ~ Pathways participant

TUTORING

Some Yalari students receive tutoring from Herbert Smith Freehills volunteers earlier in their high school careers. Several of the firm's staff from our Brisbane and Melbourne offices tutor Yalari students once a week in the evening at their respective schools. Herbert Smith Freehills staff also take the students out to an end of term dinner. Yalari regards the tutoring as 'an incredible resource' that is 'an enormous gift for our students'.

Yalari measures the outcomes of the tutoring program in terms of grade improvement (empirical) and student confidence (anecdotal). In the 2017 cohort, seven per cent of students began the year with non-passing grades, and left high school with passing grades. Yalari attributes this success to the volunteer Herbert Smith Freehills tutors.

“For me, the most exciting thing about partaking in the Yalari tutoring program is the personal relationships tutors strike with the students. Students may come in with a maths problem, but we aim to make them leave with a smile on their face having overcome a challenge. Watching students gain confidence throughout the term is incredibly rewarding.”
~ Charlotte Pilcher, Solicitor, Herbert Smith Freehills

The Pathways and tutoring programs have been running for five years and have survived changes in management at both organisations. Reflecting on this, Waverley and Llew suggest that the relationship meets a need on both sides, and has flourished because of the “belief in what we are doing, a deep cultural fit, and honesty.”

REDEFINING THE FUTURE

With 33 students graduating Year 12 in 2018, Yalari is finalising plans for the inaugural 'Year 13' life skills program for the alumni cohort. The program would incorporate adult conversations about life skills, for example transport, personal safety, legal obligations and the ramifications of being 18 years old.

“Our relationship with Herbert Smith Freehills has provided a role model for us to form similar corporate relationships – it's given us confidence about how to conduct them. We know to believe in ourselves and to have a corporate relationship that benefits both sides. Each of our partnerships is deep-seated and features engagement on each side.” ~ Waverley Stanley, CEO, Yalari